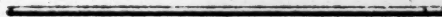


# V E R S E S

WRITTEN AT

THE FOUNTAIN OF VAUCLUSE,

IN MAY 1798.



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TO

Mrs. \* \* \* \* \*

MADAM,

IN committing the following little Poem to your notice I am bound to ask for it every indulgence. I know it to be both light and incorrect; and that it can only be ranked among those effusions of fancy, in which most young persons of your sex, and my own, will now and then indulge themselves. I have however, derived no small pleasure from the spot which forms its subject; and though, a much longer and better poem would not contain all the ideas that spot inspired me with, yet I am vain enough to hope, that the few I have been able to retain will afford you some amusement; and if they do not, that your friendship for me will excuse the attempt.

As an introduction to the verses themselves, you must permit me to relate the occurrences of two days in the month of May last, during which I visited the Fountain of Vaucluse and its neighbourhood.

This celebrated spot, the resort of all travellers who possess either taste or sentiment, is but a short distance from the road leading from Avignon to Marseilles. Those who remain a few days at the first place, generally devote one to visit it; but the inquietude of the country, and danger now attending any deviation from the established route, induced me to reach it by the most quiet, and expeditious mode. On my return therefore, from Marseilles I left the city of Aix so early, as to arrive by ten o'clock in the morning at Orgon, the most contiguous post to Vaucluse. Travellers who are not in haste may go from hence by water, so near as to make the rest of the way by no means fatiguing on foot. In order however, to pursue my journey, as I did not wish to return here, I



procured horses, and crossing the river Durance, a stream of no beauty, I proceeded over a very arid and mountainous country to the town of Cavaillon, where it becomes more pleasing. From hence continuing my route, I crossed the road leading from Avignon to Grenoble, and soon arrived in the vicinity of the Fountain.

Leaving my horses at a little hamlet or village, now so humble as to have its name almost forgotten, I walked a short distance, accompanied by a train of villagers, whose natural though simple politeness prompted them to be my guides, into the small and beautiful vale formed by a recess of the mountains from whence the Fountain issues. This vale is of a circular form; its area is composed of meadows watered by the river Sorgue, and the mountains all around it are singularly romantic: the Fountain itself flows from a cavern in their side, towards the bottom of the vale, and is no more than one of those bold springs which

are common to lime stone countries; those who have seen the caverns of Derbyshire, or others of the like kind, may form a good general idea of Vaucluse, though an inadequate one, of its particular beauties.

In order to approach the Fountain it is necessary to climb the rock for a little distance; in summer this may be done by the bed of the stream itself, which is then low and exhausted; but at this season the vernal rains had made it too copious, and I was obliged to follow a path, which seems to have existed in the days of Petrarch, equally rugged as at present, as he then lamented in one of his sonnets, its being too sharp for the delicate feet of Laura.

The cavern itself is near an hundred feet wide, though not more than twenty high: within this is a small natural bason, nearly oval, about thirty yards in diameter, in which the Fountain rises, cool, clear, and sweet, without noise or ebullition, perfectly colourless, though to appearance black, from

the reflection of the roof and sides of the cavern: from hence it flows over the rock, which is worn smooth by the action of its waters into its bed or chasm without, through which in summer it steals silently among the rocks; but now, pouring out a copious stream, it bounds from rock to rock with wild and ungovernable fury, until arriving in the vale, it becomes tranquillized, and formed into the river Sorgue.

The spring is so plentiful, that it soon becomes capable of being navigated by small boats, and supplies numerous mills in a course of about five leagues to Avignon. Its waters are highly serviceable to several manufactories, and nourish a herb which gives peculiar fatness and flavour to the herds that feed on his banks: they also afford the finest trout; yet, with all these qualities, they are impregnated with some mineral property, which renders them indigestible, and hard to the taste.

There are now no traces near it of Laura,

or of Petrarch. The fisherman's hut, which is supposed to have stood on the side of the stream where it tumbles into the vale, has been gone beyond the reach of tradition. The villagers tell a simple story of Mounsier Petrarch and Madame Laura, as a married pair, formerly great lords of the country, rich and charitable, for which they were sainted after their death; but it is easy to perceive that, by thus bestowing on them the virtues usually allotted to distinguished characters handed down from remote ages, that no tradition of their real story remains. On the top of the rock are the ruins of an old chateau, which seem to frown over the gulph below: the guides point to this as the house of Petrarch, but it never was possessed by him; it was the baronial castle of the bishops of Cavaillon (long the lords of this country), and seems to have been built on a spot selected for its strength in the ages of feudal warfare. The house which Petrarch inhabited was in the village, and has long since



perished: At the time when he frequented the Papal court at Avignon, Peter de Cabasole, his intimate friend and patron, was bishop of Cavaillon, and found in his castle here a convenient retreat from the pomp and inquietude of a court. He gave one of the houses in the village to Petrarch, not less to have with him a friend whom he dearly loved, than to indulge that friend in the possession of a spot which, next to Laura, appears to have been the dearest to his heart. At that time, doubtless, the mountains around Vaucluse were covered with forests, and the fountain itself wrapt in their shade; if so, no scene can be imagined, more formed to inspire the love of solitude and verse, or to relieve the mind by the wildness and beauty of nature.

After thus exploring the Fountain, and all that is interesting about it, I took leave of my village friends, and proceeded to L' Isle, a neat and beautiful little town, which forms a proper neighbour to Vau-

cluse. From hence I soon sat out, anxious to view before the sun descended, the vale which extends from hence to Avignon: it is one of the richest in the world, and was now covered with an intermingled culture of corn and meadow, vines, mulberry, fig, and olive trees, in the full bloom of spring. The landscape continuing to a wide extent, was at last bounded by the distant hills of Languedoc. To these native beauties were added the neat cottages and farms of the peasantry, their mild looks, and decent dress, which seemed to unite throughout the softness of Italy with the comfort of England. I reached Avignon at night, and, after an examination by the military commandant, retired to my inn: on arriving there I found it crowded with soldiers; so that soon retiring to my chamber, with a fancy warmed by the scenes of the day, I devoted the evening to compose the little work which I have now the the pleasure to lay before you.

I rose in the morning to pay a visit to the tomb of Laura, which is in the fine church of the Cordeliers. After wandering through the streets of Avignon now nearly as solitary as a desert, I reached the church, but could gain no admittance, as this, with all the others, has been shut up by order of the government, ever since those dreadful scenes which succeeded the assumption of this country by France. As no motive would prevail on the keeper to permit my entrance, I was compelled to satisfy my curiosity from his information. The tomb itself has suffered little; not that it was respected more than others by the barbarians who pillaged the churches, but that it was protected by its own obscurity. It is little more than her grave, in a small dark chapel on the right hand side of the nave. On the wall near it is a stone with the epitaph and name of her husband, Hugues de Sade, without any mention of her; this circumstance made it long doubted whether she was interred here,

and threw a shade on her history: however, the preservation of her marriage-contract in the family, the researches of her descendant the learned Abbé de Sade, and the opening of her grave, cleared up all obscurity; when opened, her bones were found with her husband's, and in her coffin a leaden medal of her own and Petrarch's heads; but what was still more precious, a small wooden tablet, on which was written, by the hand of Petrarch himself, a sonnet, which is preserved in his works.

I will not tire you with tracing the history of Petrarch further, as you will find it has been so often written, and particularly by one of your own amiable sex. The existence of Laura however, her fame for beauty and for piety, her character as an excellent wife, and the mother of a large family, are well established: that Petrarch indulged for her a long and ardent attachment, is no less true: this attachment, uniting the coldness of virtue with the enthusiasm of love, and



continued under such hopeless circumstances, seems however, to have been one of those romantic qualities of the mind peculiar to the ages of chivalry, which has not come down to our times. It is for your sex to determine whether such a passion ought to be ranked among those of the head, or of the heart. To which of the two you assign it, we shall remain for ever indebted to it for that endless and delightful fancy which, in four hundred and six sonnets, has described all the ideas of chaste and delicate love with the warm temper of Sappho, and the correct sweetness of Tibullus.

You will perceive that I have by no means confined my little Poem to the story of Petrarch and Laura; but have rather engrafted on it a short fable, tracing the rise of poetry from its ancient source through the Greek and Roman ages; its decline with them, and its revival in the modern world. To Petrarch I have justly assigned that revival, since we are indebted to him, not

only for the pleasure we derive from his verses, but for being the first modern poet who threw light on the gloom of ignorance by the labours of his pen.

I am, &c.

THE  
V E R S E S.

---

O THOU! whose shade presiding here,  
'Midst streams so murmuring, and so clear,  
Who oft, in elder days, didst sing,  
Thy numbers o'er this crystal spring,  
And mingled on thy plaintive lyre,  
A lover's sighs, and poet's fire;  
Say, wilt thou smile upon the lays?  
Which here an artless stranger pays,  
Far wandering from his native clime,  
To sip thy wave, and read thy rhyme,

To trace thy footsteps, and to see,  
 If aught of Laura, or of thee,  
 May yet remain, in vestige faint,  
 Or some kind verse, or soft complaint,  
 On the rude rock, or shade engrav'd,  
 From time's despoiling hand be sav'd!

Ah, no! thou'rt gone, and with thee flown  
 Each trait thy memory could own;  
 All but this stream, whose murmurs prove,  
 A ceaseless tribute to thy love;  
 Or simple peasants of the vale,  
 Whose rude traditionary tale,  
 In artless story tells the fame,  
 Of Petrarch, and his pious dame,  
 Who, dwelling near the fountain's side,  
 In beauty bloom'd, and sainted died.

Not so the Muse's strains unfold,  
 The slumbering page from days of old,



She lifts the veil, whose awful shield,  
 Thy story and her own conceal'd,  
 And gives to days of fair renown,  
 Thy annals mingled with her own.

First sprung from Helicon, sweet maid!  
 Amid the nymphs of Tempe's shade,  
 Artless, and young, her rural voice,  
 Made each sequester'd wild rejoice,  
 Till Greece, with rapture, caught the sound,  
 And music fill'd each vale around;  
 First from her heavenly notes began  
 Each strain that warms or softens man!  
 Her airy reed, and blitheful song,  
 Led the transported crowd along;  
 New pleasures touch'd the human heart,  
 And love with transport blest her art.

Soon did unnumber'd bards apply,  
 To win this daughter of the sky;

But coy, and young, in cottage bred,  
 From each presumptuous claim she fled;  
 O'er Homer's, and o'er Pindar's lyre,  
 She breath'd her full, majestic fire:  
 Of other bards, a countless train,  
 Few caught her animating strain;  
 Till from Sicilia's woodland vale,  
 She heard a rustic pipe prevail,  
 Ev'n like her own, in Tempe's glades,  
 When first she charm'd the listening shades,  
 She heard, and bade his numbers raise,  
 In deathless strains, the peasant's praise.

Next, o'er the Mincio's silent stream,  
 A shepherd bard, in humble theme,  
 Began to try the sylvan air,  
 And carol to his fleecy care:  
 To him she listened to impart,  
 Each effort of her matchless art;

But long she bade her favourite dwell,  
In the rude cot, and simple cell,  
And sing beneath the rustic groves,  
Their toils, their tillage, and their loves;  
Till, 'midst the sons of mighty Rome,  
With Liberty she fix'd her home,  
Then call'd her Mantuan bard to trace,  
The annals of the Roman race,  
Bid a full tide of glory rise,  
And arms, and heroes, fill the skies!

Yet here the Muse soon saw decay,  
The freedom of her artless lay;  
Contentless then, from hence she fled,  
Again to seek the shepherd's shed,  
Again its numbers to combine,  
And in its toils and sorrows join;  
There mingled with the sylvan throng,  
She led the dance, and wak'd the song:

Touch'd by her notes, their joys arose,  
Each pain was soften'd to repose,  
Each hapless love was sooth'd to rest,  
And every village swain was blest.

Po, heard the music of her strains,  
As stealing through his poplar plains,  
The plough-boy's fife, and lover's tale,  
Gave sweetness to the evening gale,  
Where, on the Appennines' blue side,  
White spires and cots the shepherd's pride,  
Outstretch'd and far, adorn'd the glades,  
And deck'd the forests awful shades.

Thus simple song, and rustic lay,  
Cheer'd many a listless age away;  
Till the rude North's barbarian band,  
With death and darkness swept the land;  
Then from each favourite scene she fled,  
In these wild solitudes to tread,



To seek unheeded, and unknown,  
This lone recess, with woods o'ergrown,  
Where then to human eye unseen,  
'Midst rude brown rocks, and forests green,  
Fairies and elves, a sportive train,  
Held the wild gambols of their reign;  
These, jealous of their favourite dell,  
Entranc'd her in a magic spell.  
Here many an age the nymph had lain,  
Till, stung by love's unceasing pain,  
Unhappy Petrarch fled to rest,  
From Laura's unrelenting breast,  
Woo'd the lone shades of Sarga's course,  
And trac'd the torrent's sacred source:  
First of the human race, he tried,  
The wild meanders of its side,  
First bent, with sad bewilder'd gaze,  
His steps along its flowery maze,

Increas'd its murmurs with his fears,  
And fed its torrent with his tears;  
Till far within its deepest gloom,  
The virgin of immortal bloom,  
Beam'd unexpected on his eyes,  
Each beauty that adorns the skies;  
In death she seem'd, yet o'er her face,  
Soft blushes, with celestial grace,  
Chang'd the white marble of her skin,  
And prov'd some spirit dwelt within;  
Rous'd at his step, her slumbers broke,  
And touch'd with wild surprise she spoke.

‘ Who art thou, mortal?’ thus she said,  
‘ Whose steps, my slumbers to invade,  
Presumest, with unhallowed pace,  
This sacred fountain’s source to trace,  
Disturb me from my long repose,  
And wake me to a world of woes.’

‘ Alas!’ said he, ‘ fair goddess, led,  
By no intrusive step I tread,  
Or vainly on thy slumbers press,  
To search this grotto’s deep recess,  
But forc’d by ceaseless grief I stray,  
To love’s inquietude a prey,  
O’er this lone wave to pour my sighs,  
And listen as its shade replies,  
Hear Echo tell of Laura’s fame,  
And call for ever on her name,  
Till mute myself, and silent grown,  
Sad life, and love, and sorrow flown,  
My fading form should pass away,  
No trace its memory to betray,  
Save that, if o’er this murmuring rill,  
My hovering spirit e’er might fill,  
The bosom of each tender maid,  
Who seeks its fond inspiring shade,

And listens, as its torrent flows,  
 To some desponding lover's woes,  
 Mov'd by the sigh, and falling tear,  
 To love and beauty offer'd here,  
 With fond indulgency to prove,  
 A brighter fate, and happier love.'

The goddess heard, and thought again,  
 She saw in him her Mantuan swain;  
 Glories long past inspir'd her heart,  
 Once more to try her matchless art,  
 Once more the ages to unbind,  
 And with her presence bless mankind.  
 'Rash youth!' said she, 'now deathless made,  
 By thy rude trespass on this shade,  
 A present take, assume the lyre,  
 And sing the numbers I inspire;  
 A goddess I, who long have spread,  
 My blessings o'er the shepherd's shed,



And ever in love's troubled breast,  
Infus'd the sounds that give it rest;  
Since then, an unrelenting dame,  
Consumes thee with a hopeless flame,  
A kinder mistress I will prove,  
And pay in fame the loss of love;  
Begin, and mingle on thy string,  
Thy sorrows with this crystal spring;  
Through time unceasing let it flow,  
Made sacred by thy verse and woe,  
While an unfading wreath to twine,  
Laura, and love, and I, will join;  
This, like the wreath which long of yore,  
The sacred brow of Virgil bore,  
With mingled bays, and myrtles made,  
Illustrious, shall thy temples shade:  
Go hence to Rome's imperial gate,  
On thee her future honours wait,

Revive her in thy matchless page,  
 And raise again her golden age;  
 Once more I see the morn arise,  
 And a new star adorn the skies,  
 The lustre of whose silver ray,  
 Shall light the nations into day.

I go, to lead the rosy band,  
 Of bright-ey'd virtues o'er the land,  
 From dim obscurity to trace,  
 Each sister art, and white rob'd grace,  
 Call science from her deep retreats,  
 Again t' adorn her ancient seats,  
 With cots and swains to dwell once more,  
 Myself, and bless them as before.

Such are the notes, which here I feel,  
 Some secret influence reveal;  
 As yet in harmony unskill'd,  
 No tuneful muse my bosom fill'd,

Till touch'd by thee, inspiring shade!  
Whose genius listened to my aid,  
Thine be the praise, while in my heart,  
Or love, or music, holds a part;  
In early days thy numbers taught,  
Each delicate and tender thought,  
And now while bending o'er thy spring,  
Thou hear'st my prayers, and bid'st me sing.

Here should I close, nor let the lay,  
Rove from the favourite theme away;  
Yet while the Alps majestic height,  
Recalls the region of delight,  
The muse the tuneful strain will raise,  
And prompt my numbers in its praise;  
O Italy! to thee belong,  
All the bright tributes of her song;  
Delightful clime! whose fost'ring earth,  
To Maro gave, and Petrarch birth,

What though again barbarian arms,  
Spread o'er thy vales war's dire alarms,  
Each impious sacrilege impart,  
And steal the glories of thy art;  
Still is it thine to warm the soul,  
And conquest's ruthless self controul,  
Still at thy lettered fanes shall bow,  
Each rude invader's haughty brow,  
Thy climes the assailer's force assuage,  
And thy arts triumph o'er their rage.

Perhaps these eyes no more again,  
Far hid beyond the western main,  
Shall with fond luxury pursue,  
The scenes now fading on their view;  
Yet shall thy hills for ever rise,  
And the red radiance of thy skies,  
Thy summer isles, and flow'ry vales,  
And the soft incense of thy gales,



Rome's proud remains, thro' time renown'd,  
Awful with age and glory crown'd,  
These oft shall bid remembrance glow,  
The sigh to throb, and tear to flow,  
Wake in the breast each tender charm,  
And life's expiring fancy warm.

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